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ABSTRACT

In order to find reliable methods of ascertaining quality in library service, three public libraries in the Chicago area were assessed using the Rutgers "Performance Measures for Public Libraries." The Rutgers study can reveal the needs and characteristics of library patrons, and may itself be instrumental in increasing patronage. It also may be used as an effective idea generator. Most importantly, the data gathered in this study can also aid management in the decision making and in the formulation of library budgets. (DS)

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Practical Applications in Performance Measurements

by

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The practical applications of the findings from library performance measurements as reported in this paper are based on the experiences of three Chicago-area libraries, Morton Grove, Northbrook, and Waukegan, all members of the North Suburban Library System in northeastern Illinois. The libraries may be described as medium-sized or small depending upon whose definition is used.

The three libraries agree that the Rutgers "Performance Measures for Public Libraries" study is a major step forward in the search for reliable methods of ascertaining quality in library service. The assessment of library performance in the past relied upon kind words from devoted patrons, varying degrees of intuition, or nebulous interpretations of gains or losses in circulation statistics in terms of local economic conditions or recreational or cultural competition. The elements in the old-style assessment may be summed up in one word - opinions. And, as Peter Drucker, a leading management consultant, has pointed out, opinions are hardly an adequate foundation for the measurement of a discipline. The elements in the new measurement study offer an opportunity to replace opinions with the objectivity of facts, a prime requirement in sound

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decision-making.

The first time I was faced with an official request for facts based on solid, substantial performance measurements was twenty years ago. The mayor of our city at that time was a lawyer, a political scientist, and an author of theoretical articles about local government. The day came when he called a meeting of the administrators of all tax-supported institutions. He asked for reports on performance. He wanted to know how well each institution was satisfying the needs of the community. The best professional aid for libraries at that time was the document known as the public library standards. These standards were valuable guidelines. However, they were not adaptable to a precise demonstration of how well the library was meeting the unique requirements of citizens of all ages in the community.

This mayor of twenty years ago prophesized that the day is going to come when all tax-supported services, from public education and libraries to municipal bands and garbage departments, will be required to justify their continuance. He projected a situation in which tax-supported agencies, exclusive of police and fire departments, will submit their current programs and their budgets on a single ballot and the tax-burdened public will make a choice at the polls. I can remember thinking twenty years ago that in terms of the mayor's concern for measurement, the only department that would have won was the garbage department. Its productivity was measureable.

The prophecy of an exacting judgment at the polls of the value of existing public facilities may seem an unlikely development in

view of the fact that the public continuously demands more services from public institutions, not their elimination. There is, however, citizen talk in many states about tax limitations. There is competition at the polls on the local level for additional tax dollars for improved services, operating funds, or new buildings. Many libraries have been able to justify requests for extended public support, but they and other institutions are affected by opinions held by users and non-users. Justification of financial proposals unduly dependent upon opinion leaves any institution vulnerable to the force of counter opinion.

One of the assets of the Rutgers study is its visibility. The public is involved in this type of measurement study. Library patrons respond to an activity which looks interesting. They ask questions which gives the staff an opportunity to explain the purpose of the study as a base for measurement and decision-making. Those of us who have been involved in the Rutgers study have reason to be convinced that there is wide-spread public approval of efforts to assess services as a part of a plan to more precisely meet the needs of individuals and groups. The completed data is applicable to public reporting at meetings or in the press.

Some might say that this is all well and good. Library patrons know about this effort; the readers of the local newspaper know about the results of the study. What about the non-user, a large part of many communities?

The news spreads. I can give you one concrete illustration. In 1971 when my library was involved in the pilot measurement study, I went to Chicago for an all-day meeting. My cab driver was a chatty

soul who asked why I was going to a hotel without baggage when the heavy purse I was carrying indicated that Marshall Fields should have been my destination. I explained that I was going to a library meeting. Oh, he knew all about libraries and he held up a book from the Morton Gove Public Library, one of the triumvirate in this report. He proceeded to tell me that his library was engaged in studying itself in a program of analyzing local library effectiveness. Between the North Western station and Chicago Sheraton he reviewed for me the essential points in the Rutgers manual. At the door of the hotel he asked if I didn't agree that Morton Grove had a great library. I did.

We have all learned a great deal about the characteristics of the users in the management study. It is true that much information about library clients is to be found in registration records. Knowledge of users needs is to be found in the heads of resourceful staff. However, there is a special impact when facts about users are gathered in a concentrated period of time. The data undercuts some of the myths about library users. There is an old myth, still alive in some medium-size and small communities, that library patrons are made up primarily of housewives and school children. In Waukegan we found that 53.8% of our patrons in 1971 were male. This percentage dropped in 1975 to 52%. The analysis of the cause for this percentage change will be made when all of the data for 1975 is available. However, even the preliminary findings reinforce the essentiality of recognizing the presence and the needs of segments of the public who may not be as articulate as the child or the "best-seller patron".

Still another myth that prevails in many small communities is

that men and women in the business sector do not use the library. This myth was shattered in our libraries by evidence that the popular hours for the use of business resources was between 11 a.m. and 1:59 in the afternoon. This data, at least on one occasion, was unusually effective in convincing a critical alderman that the library's informational services play an important role in the economic welfare of the community.

One interesting point about a well-developed measurement study is that it can be an idea generator. We three libraries went one step beyond the data-gathering requirements of the measurement study manual to pick up some additional information that wasn't sent along for computer analysis. A tally of the various kinds of life-work represented in their clientele was made by each library. This tally was made in the interest of in-house background information in anticipation of gaining insight of value for the selection of materials and in reference work. In Waukegan, we found, for example, that the adults using our library in a three day period represented 197 professions or occupations in a community of approximately 60,000. There is nothing unusual about a variety of jobs in the average community. Occupational diversity is common to many areas. What was unusual was that my town, located on the western shores of Lake Michigan, a focal point for coho fishing, smelt runs, and boating, turned up with an oceanographer. He was a familiar figure in the library, the strong silent type, the self-reliant library user. He had indicated on his registration card that he was a university professor at a prestigious university thirty miles to the south. It was not until the first day of the measurement study that we found out that he was an oceanographer. We found this out because he had used the back of the

ticket to express his disappointment that our collection did not include highly technical material on oceanography. It is doubtful that our collection will ever have great strength in its holdings in that field. His interests, however, point to the importance of access to specialized materials through systems or networks. This kind of information revealed by the measurement study has applicability for library systems in the planning for inter-library loans, reciprocal borrowing or contracting for the strengthening of special collections. It also points to the fact that perhaps we in the libraries need to make every effort to communicate even with the most self-reliant patron.

A dominant concern in any library effectiveness study is the measurement of patron satisfaction. The Rutgers study provides an opportunity for the patron to indicate degrees of satisfaction, in answering the question, "Did you find what you wanted in this library: Yes, No, or partially?" The yes answers were reassuring. A negative response left wide open the question of why the patron was dissatisfied. The study now gives the patrons an opportunity to indicate whether they had asked for staff assistance. The latest results for our three libraries are not in, but answers to this question may provide a corollary between staff assistance and public satisfaction.

An important phase of the measurement study relates to the number of reference questions which can be answered from the library's own resources. The data may be instructive from the standpoint of gauging the adequacy and currency of the collection, indicating need for intensive in-service training or perhaps suggesting more intensive promotion of public awareness of available reference materials

and professional assistance. The reference data also has significance for those library systems which have as one of their objectives the provision of sophisticated or specialized reference facilities as support services for their member libraries.

The most valuable asset of the study is the compilation of data which is of major importance to library boards in decision making or budget preparation. Trustees expect justification for an expanded budget item requiring additional personnel for an on-going program. They are concerned about facts to support a proposal to close a gap in services. They are reassured by evidence that quality of staff relates to quality of satisfaction. This kind of data the study can provide. The measurement study also provides background for administrative decisions, as in the case of an analysis of periods of public use which may indicate that a shift in scheduling patterns is in order. The data may suggest guidelines to some libraries in the advantageous reorganization of space and in planning for a replacement of a lighting system or the improvement of other physical facilities.

The printouts offer an opportunity to compare use, activities, and patron satisfaction in one library with other libraries of comparable size in budgets or collections. A library with a low use-rating for a specific population category may analyze to advantage the use of equipment or materials offered by a high rating library. The clue to a low rating may be in insufficiency of materials for age groups which have been identified in the study. The facts revealed about title availability in either books or periodicals may provide insight into the reasons for lessening or increasing public

use in one library as compared to another. The analysis of comparative data may result in revised priorities in allocation of funds to allow for title duplication or other strategies to enhance user satisfaction.

There are several direct benefits in a measurement study which do not appear on the computer printout. One is the built-in factor of staff involvement. All personnel, from shelvers and assistants to supervisors and the administrator, may contribute at various stages to the methodology. Staff-wide participation leads to the conviction that this is one experiment in which everyone has a share in building up a body of knowledge which will help the library to know where it stands and where changes for improved service may be made effectively. Staff enthusiasm, however, is diminished by the time lag between the completion of the study and the return of the data from the computer center. This should not be too difficult a problem to resolve as more libraries participate in and support cooperative measurement studies.

The "Performance Measures for Public Libraries" study is in the testing stage. It does not provide definitive answers to all questions raised by administrators and trustees. It has, however, proved its worth and merits continuous refinement for application to management problems in large and small libraries throughout the country.